



Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS Purpose of the Plan

The comment period for the *Draft Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* (Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS) will be open until March 22, 2005. During that time, interested organizations and individuals are invited to review the document and provide written comments on the plan's four alternatives.

What will be revised? The plan's revision focuses on two components of the original 2000 Merced River Plan: the establishment of a user capacity that proposes what the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals calls "specific measurable limits on use," and the reassessment of the corridor boundaries in El Portal. The Merced River Plan's other management elements (boundaries, classifications, Outstandingly Remarkable Values, management zoning, River Protection Overlay, Section 7 determination process) remain in place, as approved in 2000.

Why is the plan being revised? The National Park Service was directed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to prepare a "new or revised" comprehensive management plan that addressed what the Court saw as two deficiencies:

1. The user capacity program outlined in the 2000 plan (the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection [VERP] framework) was not fully developed and only presented sample standards and indicators. The user capacity program in this revised plan must contain "specific measurable limits on use"; and
2. The river corridor boundary in El Portal must be drawn to account for the protection and enhancement of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values in this segment.

In addition, in a separate decision, the U.S. District Court directed the NPS to detail how the Merced River Plan amends the *General Management Plan*.

What is proposed?

Alt. 1 No Action: Page II-25

Alt. 2 Interim Facility Limits with
VERP Monitoring:
Pages II-32 & 33

Alt. 3 Segment Quotas with
VERP Monitoring:
Page II-59

Alt. 4 Management Zone
Quotas with VERP Monitoring:
Page II-65

User Capacity: Specific Measurable Limits

The four alternatives evaluated in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS propose new limits on use. These would be added to the use management tools that have been at work in Yosemite for decades, including the existing Wilderness Trailhead Quota System.

Establishing quotas on the numbers of people entering the river corridor is not enough to protect the river's unique values. In all of the action alternatives, a study process grounded in science will be mobilized to better track the connection between levels of use and possible impacts to the river. If monitoring shows that impacts are occurring, park managers could choose from a variety of possible actions, referred to in the draft plan as a *Management Action Toolbox* (page II-52). These actions would range from increasing education and awareness about impacts in a given area, to temporarily redirecting use away from areas where damage is occurring. The plan also lays out the decision-making process.

To facilitate the on-the-ground protection of river values, the user capacity program monitors a system of indicators and standards, which is part of a process known as the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) program. **Indicators** identify those qualities that serve as early warning signs to better highlight where too much use may be occurring. **Standards** are then established to set the bar for when action should be taken to prevent or reverse impacts. These indicators and standards are specific, measurable, and reflect the kinds of visitor experience qualities and resource conditions expected in different segments of the corridor. Working in concert with the monitoring program, the National Park Service would be able to take more responsive action to protect values—including protecting the experience of visitors—in the river corridor.

The plan's alternatives also propose other specific limits that would be in place alongside the VERP user capacity program. Alternative 2 proposes interim limits on facilities until the VERP program is fully functioning and providing direction on ways to manage use. Alternative 3 proposes fixed visitor use limits by river segment, and Alternative 4 brings the limits into closer focus by establishing fixed quotas within individual management zones. Alternatives 3 and 4 also propose an annual cap on the number of users in the river corridor.

BOUNDARY MAPS

Alt. 1: Page II-28

Alt. 2: Page II-55

Alt. 3: Page II-63

Alt. 4: page II-71

El Portal

In addition to user capacity, the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS evaluates new El Portal corridor boundary alternatives that are based on the protection and enhancement of river values—known as Outstandingly Remarkable Values. All of the action alternatives include areas encompassing the Outstandingly Remarkable Values to within a quarter-mile of the river. The alternatives also propose different management zoning schemes to prescribe the types of facilities and activities allowed within specific areas.

What will this mean for a visit to Yosemite?

In the short term, adoption of this plan is not expected to result in dramatic changes. Many aspects of the user capacity program have been successfully in place for years, and the new specific measurable limits being added are based on existing facility and use levels. However, over the longer term, management actions may be required to keep conditions within the standards established in the monitoring program. This would likely result in some changes to better manage and redirect use in the river corridor.

Will the park close the gates if limits are reached?

Although it may not be clear in the plan, turning people away at entrance gates – or otherwise closing park entrances – is *not* being proposed in the preferred alternative in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan. The plan's intent is to effectively monitor visitor experience and resource conditions in the river corridor, and respond to potential adverse impacts with management actions to protect and enhance the river's unique values.

For more on Management Actions, see pages II-50 to 52

Some proposed management actions may require additional environmental review and public comment before implementation, others may not. Actions that could be implemented without further review include, redirecting visitors to other locations within the Wild and Scenic River corridor, to other areas of the park, or to other less crowded portions of Yosemite Valley on those days when visitation is at its peak. It is also expected that more responsive and timely communication with gateway communities, bus operators, and visitors who are in route to the park will help control the timing of people entering the Merced River corridor on the busiest days.

What are the next steps?

Through March 22, 2005

Written comments will be accepted.

Spring 2005

Comments received during the official review period are analyzed and a Final Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS is prepared.

Mid-Summer 2005

The Final Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS is released, followed by a 30-day waiting period.

End of Summer 2005

Record of Decision is scheduled to be signed by the National Park Service Pacific West Regional Director. User capacity elements and new El Portal boundary will be implemented.